

## **Disability Awareness Month**

### **AWARENESS DAY**

A successfully planned special event can play a major role in developing disability awareness in your local community.

Declaring a day in March as Disability Awareness Day can increase understanding of the issues facing people with disabilities in your community. For instance, by simulating disabilities such as blindness and deafness, school children can experience firsthand what it is like to have a disability. Also, exhibits by service providers and advocacy groups can provide important information to the public. You might want to ask the mayor to attend and proclaim the day as Disability Awareness Day. To have a successful event, be sure to begin planning as soon as possible and no later than one month in advance.

The Indiana Governor's Planning Council for People with Disabilities publishes an *Awareness Activities* booklet that discusses different simulations. Information in that publication and the following guidelines for planning an Awareness Day can be adapted to your community.

#### **Planning**

First, set a date and decide where to hold your Awareness Day event. The town hall, other local government buildings or schools are often available to the public. The event needs to be held in a building with enough space for activities and exhibits. Be sure the building is accessible to people with disabilities. You will need to check with the manager of the building to reserve it for your event.

You should appoint a committee to help you plan the event. By recruiting volunteers, you will gain people with expertise in many areas. Contact agencies, local parent groups and advocacy organizations that work with people with disabilities to participate in the event. A local rehabilitation facility is a good source for providing materials you might need for a simulation activity. The organization might also be able to supply you with an appropriate booth or display. Be sensitive to the different kinds of disabilities, and try to include an exhibit from each local group, if possible.

## **Simulations**

A lot of coordination is necessary to set up simulation activities. Try to get a state agency or a professional to be responsible for each simulation activity. For example, you could contact your local hospital's physical therapy department for assistance with a wheelchair obstacle course. Often home health care agencies that rent wheelchairs are willing to lend wheelchairs for this type of event. Community rehabilitation facilities or local vocational rehabilitation and client services offices can be approached to help, too.

You might want to include a garden hose for the participants to navigate their wheelchairs over; orange cones for the participants to wind through; and ramps to show other physical challenges that persons with disabilities face every day. It's important to have a professional "spotter" at each activity station. A "spotter" explains to each participant how to navigate the wheelchair through the activity. He or she should be nearby in case the participant needs help. The easiest way to plan the simulation activities is with professional help.

Please refer to the *Awareness Activities* booklet for additional ideas and suggestions of simulations.

## **Exhibits**

Ask local agencies and centers that provide services for people with disabilities to set up displays at the event explaining the types of services they provide. This will help the public gain understanding about different types of disabilities and disability-related issues. It would also be a good idea to have local employers on hand to provide job information to people with disabilities.

## **Dignitaries**

Call the officials/dignitaries you wish to invite to participate in Awareness Day. It's important to contact these officials early, because their calendars are filled weeks in advance. When you speak with the official or his or her secretary, be sure to ask if a written request is necessary. If so, write the official a letter and include all pertinent details about Awareness Day.

The following are suggestions on whom to invite: city officials, town board members, city council representatives, county officials, state legislators, fire chief, police chief, county sheriff, local business leaders, Chamber of Commerce president, presidents of service organizations in your community (such as Kiwanis, Rotary or Jaycees), presidents of local veterans' organizations, school superintendent, school principals, teachers, local media publishers, presidents of local women's organizations, such as service sororities, coaches from local high schools and middle schools, and presidents of high school and middle school student councils or National Honor Societies.

### **Media Relations**

Send a calendar release to daily or weekly newspapers three weeks before the event. Calendar sections are often put together in advance of other sections of the paper. If you're sending a calendar release to a weekly, find out exact deadlines for submitting information. Call to get the names of the editor(s) of the local paper(s) and the news director(s) of local radio and television station(s). Let them know communities across the country are celebrating Disability Awareness Month in March and give them information on what you've planned for the local Awareness Day.

Invite the media representatives to attend or send a reporter. Suggest possible story ideas and inform them that you will be sending an advisory soon. (See enclosed advisory.) Mail the advisory one week in advance or fax it a day or two before the event. Be sure to get the correct spelling of names, and titles and mailing addresses. Possible story ideas include: local and national planned activities during Disability Awareness Month; a feature story on a local person with a disability or a local service provider; businesses that are making accommodations for employees and customers with disabilities.

To monitor media coverage, have your friends use their VCRs to tape local newscasts. If you know which radio station(s) covered your event and what time the interview(s) will air, you can tape those newscast(s), too. Don't forget your local papers. Have your friends watch for any articles on Awareness Day.

## **Follow Up**

After your simulation event, send a follow-up news release and a black-and-white photo to the media who did not cover your event. (See sample release.) The follow-up release should be an expanded version of the media advisory, listing those officials who participated and the various Awareness Day activities. Be sure to identify the people in the photographs for the media.

Your event should be followed up with thank you letters to the media and volunteers who participated. The enclosed thank you letter will serve as a guide. Your letter should be personalized with thoughts on your community and your event.

Sometimes a reporter with the best intentions inadvertently uses language in a story that creates negative impressions of people with disabilities. Examples include “the handicapped” or “the disabled person.” If you receive such media coverage, send a thank you letter, but also include suggestions and a set of guidelines for correct language when referring to people with disabilities. A sample letter is enclosed, along with “Guidelines for Reporting and Writing about People with Disabilities,” produced by the Indiana Governor’s Planning Council for People with Disabilities.

**NOTE: In the past, projects such as this have taken 5-8 hours to complete.**

(Sample Calendar Release)

**Calendar Release**

For Immediate Release  
(Date)

Contact:  
(Your Name)  
(Your phone)

The Anytown Support Group for People with Disabilities is hosting “Disability Awareness Day” (from 10 a.m. - 5 p.m., Monday, March \_\_\_\_, at the Anytown City Hall). The event will include simulation activities for children and several exhibits and demonstrations. For more information, contact (Joe Smith at 123-4567).

# # #

(Sample Media Advisory)

For Immediate Release  
(Date)

Contact:  
(Your Name)  
(Your phone)

### **MEDIA ADVISORY**

**What** Disability Awareness Day

Simulation activities and disability exhibits from state agencies, advocacy organizations and parent groups will help people of all ages gain an understanding of what it's like to have a disability and issues facing people with disabilities in our community.

**When** (Monday, March \_\_)  
(10 a.m. to 5 p.m.)

**Where** (Anytown City Hall)  
(1234 Main Street)

**Who** Mayor (John Doe) and several other city officials and local dignitaries are scheduled to participate in various activities to increase awareness for individuals with disabilities as people first. Those invited to participate include: (list dignitaries here).

**Note** The event is free of charge and open to the public. For more information call (123-4567).

# # #

(Sample Radio PSA)

(Your Name)  
(Your phone)

Start: (February \_\_, 20\_\_)  
Stop: (March \_\_, 20\_\_)

TIME: 15 seconds

**“AWARENESS DAY”**

ANNOUNCER

TO CELEBRATE DISABILITY AWARENESS MONTH,  
(XYZ AGENCY) IS SPONSORING AN AWARENESS  
DAY, (MONDAY, MARCH 6 FROM 10 A.M. TO 5 P.M.  
AT ANYTOWN CITY HALL). THERE WILL BE  
SIMULATION ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN AND  
EXHIBITS FOR ADULTS. THE EVENT IS FREE AND  
OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.

# # #

(Sample News Release)

For Immediate Release  
(Date)

Contact:  
(Your Name)  
(Your phone)

**More than (1,000) residents attend (Anytown's) Disability Awareness Day**

(Anytown), Ind. – More than (1,000) residents turned out for the Disability Awareness Day celebration at (City Hall) to kick off Disability Awareness Month. Mayor (John Doe) presented a “Disability Awareness Day” proclamation to the (Anytown Support Group for People with Disabilities), which hosted the event. Other local dignitaries in attendance were (list dignitaries).

“We are extremely pleased with the participation from (Anytown) officials and residents,” said (Joe Smith, president of the Anytown Support Group). “People with disabilities are a rapidly growing segment of our population, and it’s important that our citizens recognize the abilities of people with disabilities.”

Children who attended Awareness Day participated in a variety of disability simulation activities. There were also numerous exhibitors including (service providers and local employers).

For more information about the (Anytown Support Group for People with Disabilities) or other Disability Awareness Month activities, please contact (Joe Smith at 123-4567).

# # #



(Sample Thank You Letter)

(Date)

(Mr. Jim Johnson)  
(Title)  
(XYZ Company/Organization)  
(123 Main Street)  
(Anytown, Indiana 46000)

Dear (Mr. Johnson):

Thank you for participating in our Disability Awareness Day activities. Your involvement helped make the event a tremendous success. More than (1,000) people attended and gained a better understanding of disability issues.

We hope you personally learned something about people with disabilities through the simulation activities and the disability information booths. Increasing the awareness and understanding of people with disabilities in our community is our goal. We appreciate your help in working toward that goal.

Thanks again, and we hope the day was enjoyable for you.

Sincerely,

(Your Name)  
(Title)

(Sample Thank You Letter – With Suggestions for Appropriate Language)

(Date)

(Mr. John Doe)

(Title)

(XYZ Media)

(123 Main Street)

(Anytown, Indiana 46000)

Dear (Mr. Doe):

Thank you for your recent article/broadcast about our organization/event. Although we always appreciate coverage about people with disabilities and the issues that concern them, it is also important to realize that the way a reporter tells a story can make a significant difference in how people with disabilities are perceived in the community.

Reporting on the disability community is just like reporting on any other minority group; there are “correct” words and phrases to use. The Indiana Governor’s Planning Council for People with Disabilities and other disability organizations emphasize “people first” language that focuses on the person first, with the disability as secondary. For example, *woman who is deaf* is preferred over *deaf woman*. In addition, *people with disabilities* is preferred over *the handicapped* or *the disabled*.

I have enclosed “Guidelines for Reporting and Writing about People with Disabilities.” The guidelines explain preferred terminology when reporting about people with disabilities and reflect the input of more than 100 national disability organizations.

If you ever have a question these guidelines don’t address, please feel free to contact me. Again, we appreciate your coverage of our organization and people with disabilities in general.

Sincerely,

(Your Name)

(Title)

enclosure

## **Guidelines for Reporting and Writing About People with Disabilities**

When writing, it's important to be concise, particularly in journalism. However, sometimes the effort to limit wordiness leads to inappropriate references to people with disabilities. The following guidelines explain preferred terminology and reflect input from more than 100 national disability organizations. These guidelines have been reviewed and endorsed by media and disability experts throughout the country. Although opinions may differ on some terms, the guidelines represent the current consensus among disability organizations. Portions of the guidelines have been adopted into the "Associated Press Stylebook," a basic reference for professional journalists.

**DO NOT FOCUS ON DISABILITY** unless it is crucial to a story. Avoid tear-jerking human interest stories about incurable diseases, congenital impairments or severe injury. Focus instead on issues that affect the quality of life for those individuals, such as accessible transportation, housing, affordable health care, employment opportunities and discrimination.

**PUT PEOPLE FIRST**, not their disability. Say "woman with arthritis," "children who are deaf" or "people with disabilities." This puts the focus on the individual, not the particular functional limitation. Despite editorial pressures to be succinct, it is never acceptable to use "crippled," "deformed," "suffers from," "victim of," "the retarded," "the deaf and dumb," etc.

**DO NOT SENSATIONALIZE A DISABILITY** by writing "afflicted with," "crippled with," "suffers from," "victim of" and so on. Instead, write "person who has multiple sclerosis" or "man who had polio."

**DO NOT USE GENERIC LABELS** for disability groups, such as "the retarded" or "the deaf." Emphasize people, not labels. Say "people with mental retardation" or "people who are deaf."

**EMPHASIZE ABILITIES**, not limitations. For example:

- Correct: "uses a wheelchair/braces" or "walks with crutches"
- Incorrect: "confined to a wheelchair," "wheelchair-bound" or "crippled"

Similarly, do not use emotional descriptors such as "unfortunate," "pitiful" and similar phrases.

Disability groups also strongly object to using euphemisms to describe disabilities. Terms such as "handi-capable," "mentally different," "physically inconvenienced" and "physically challenged" are considered condescending. They reinforce the idea that disabilities cannot be dealt with directly and candidly.

**SHOW PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AS ACTIVE** participants in society. Portraying persons with disabilities interacting with people without disabilities in social and work environments helps break down barriers and open lines of communications.

**DO NOT PORTRAY SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AS SUPERHUMAN.** Many people with disabilities do not want to be “hero-ized.” Like many people without disabilities, they wish to be fully included in our communities and do not want to be judged based on unreasonable expectations.

**DO NOT IMPLY DISEASE** when discussing disabilities that result from a prior disease episode. People who had polio and experienced after-effects have a post-polio disability. They are not currently experiencing the disease. Do not imply disease with people whose disability has resulted from anatomical or physiological damage (e.g., person with spina bifida or cerebral palsy). Reference to the disease associated with a disability is acceptable only with chronic diseases, such as arthritis, Parkinson’s disease or multiple sclerosis. People with disabilities should never be referred to as “patients” or “cases” unless their relationship with their doctor is under discussion.

**LISTED BELOW ARE PREFERRED WORDS THAT REFLECT A POSITIVE ATTITUDE IN PORTRAYING DISABILITIES:**

- *Brain injury.* Describes a condition where there is long-term or temporary disruption in brain function resulting from injury to the brain. Difficulties with cognitive, physical, emotional or social functioning may occur. Use “person with a brain injury,” “woman who has sustained brain injury” or “boy with an acquired brain injury.”
- *Cleft lip.* Describes a specific congenital disability involving lip and gum. The term “hare lip” is anatomically incorrect and stigmatizing. Use “person who has a cleft lip” or “a cleft palate.”
- *Deaf.* Deafness refers to a profound degree of hearing loss that prevents understanding speech though the ear. “Hearing impaired” and “hearing loss” are generic terms used by some individuals to indicate any degree of hearing loss – from mild to profound. These terms include people who are hard of hearing and deaf. However, some individuals completely disfavor the term “hearing impaired.” Others prefer to use “deaf” or “hard of hearing.” “Hard of hearing” refers to a mild to moderate hearing loss that may or may not be corrected with amplification. Use “woman who is deaf,” “boy who is hard of hearing,” “individuals with hearing losses” and “people who are deaf or hard of hearing.”
- *Disability.* General term used for a functional limitation that interferes with a person’s ability to, for example, walk, lift, hear or learn. It may refer to a physical, sensory or mental condition. Use as a descriptive noun or adjective, such as “person living with AIDS,” “woman who is blind” or “man with a disability.” “Impairment” refers to loss or abnormality of an organ or body mechanism, which may result in a disability.
- *Disfigurement.* Refers to physical changes caused by burn, trauma, disease or congenital problems.

- *Down syndrome*. Describes a chromosome disorder that usually causes a delay in physical, intellectual and language development. Usually results in mental retardation. “Mongol” or “mongoloid” are unacceptable.
- *Handicap*. Not a synonym for disability. Describes a condition or barrier imposed by society, the environment or by one’s self. Some individuals prefer “inaccessible” or “not accessible” to describe social and environmental barriers. “Handicap” can be used when citing laws and situations, but should not be used to describe a disability. Do not refer to people with disabilities as “the handicapped” or “handicapped people.” Say “the building is not accessible for a wheelchair-user.” “The stairs are a handicap for her.”
- *HIV/AIDS*. Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome is an infectious disease resulting in the loss of the body’s immune system to ward off infections. The disease is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). A positive test for HIV can occur without symptoms of the illnesses, which usually develop up to 10 years later, including tuberculosis, recurring pneumonia, cancer, recurrent vaginal yeast infections, intestinal ailments, chronic weakness and fever and profound weight loss. Preferred: “people living with HIV,” “people with AIDS” or “living with AIDS.”
- *Mental disability*. The Federal Rehabilitation Act (Section 504) lists four categories under mental disability: “psychiatric disability,” “retardation,” “learning disability” or “cognitive impairment” is acceptable.
- *Nondisabled*. Appropriate term for people without disabilities. “Normal,” “able-bodied,” “healthy” or “whole” are inappropriate.
- *Seizure*. Describes an involuntary muscular contraction, a brief impairment or loss of consciousness, etc., resulting from a neurological condition such as epilepsy or from an acquired brain injury. Rather than “epileptic,” say “girl with epilepsy” or “boy with a seizure disorder.” The term “convulsion” should be used only for seizures involving contraction of the entire body.
- *Spastic*. Describes a muscle with sudden abnormal and involuntary spasm. Not appropriate for describing someone with cerebral palsy or a neurological disorder. Muscles, not people, are spastic.
- *Stroke*. Caused by interruption of blood to brain. Hemiplegia (paralysis on one side) may result. “Stroke survivor” is preferred over “stroke victim.”

The Indiana Governor’s Planning Council for People with Disabilities would like to acknowledge the Research and Training Center on Independent Living at the University of Kansas for the usage rights of the “Guidelines.”

## **AWARENESS DAY TIMELINE CHECKLIST**

\*\* This timeline checklist should be adjusted according to your specific planning time frame.

### **Six weeks before your Awareness Day event:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Decide what type of awareness event you want to have. See the enclosed suggestions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Choose a place and date to have your event. Call the manager or person in charge of that building to reserve the date. Keep in mind that high-traffic buildings will increase your event's visibility. Make sure the building is accessible to people with disabilities.
- \_\_\_\_\_ If possible, enlist the services and ideas of local community service groups. An event like this is easier to plan with some help.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Call your local rehabilitation facilities, support agencies and advocacy groups to request their participation in your event. Ask them to bring a display to set up at the event.
- \_\_\_\_\_ If you have simulation activities, make arrangements to have the appropriate equipment and personnel. For example, to have a wheelchair obstacle course, you will need to borrow wheelchairs from a health organization and arrange to have a professional spotter.

### **Five weeks before your Awareness Day event:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Call the local newspaper(s) and radio and television station(s) and get contact names for the release and PSA you will be mailing. Be sure to get the correct spelling of names, and titles and mailing addresses.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Invite dignitaries to attend and participate in Awareness Day.

### **Four weeks before your Awareness Day event:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Mail the PSA to the appropriate contacts. A few days after you mail the materials, follow up with your contacts to be sure they received the PSA.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Confirm volunteers and agencies that will supply a booth or exhibit.

**Two weeks before your Awareness Day event:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Confirm details with the organization(s) who have agreed to provide professional personnel or equipment. (For example, wheelchairs or spotters.)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Remind the volunteers of their specific duties.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Confirm the officials who have agreed to participate. If possible, find out what time they plan to attend. This information will help the media schedule photo assignments.

**One week before your Awareness Day event:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Mail or fax the advisory to local media. Make follow-up calls a day or two before the event.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Remind your friends and volunteers to help you monitor the media coverage.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Arrange to have a volunteer take pictures of the simulation events. Use black-and-white film so that you can send prints to the media after your event. You might want to take the pictures yourself.

**After your Awareness Day event:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Send thank you letters to the appropriate people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Send a follow-up news release and a black-and-white photo to the local newspaper(s) that did not cover your event. Be sure to clearly identify those photographed.